

A Second Chance

by arian

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Summary: After the threat of meteor has been removed, Vincent is left wondering about Lucrecia's fate

1. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="ProgId"> A Second Chance

A Second Chance

By Arian

Author's note: You wouldn't believe how long it took me to write this! But just to warn you, it's depressingâ€|

A lone figure stood on the deck of the Highwind, the breeze lifting his hair from the scarlet cape. Silently, he watched the last glimmers of sunlight leave the sky and shadows crawled across the land, far below. He sighed with relief. After the years he had spent in the cellar of the Shinra mansion in Nibelheim, he was more comfortable in darkness. Things were easier. For a while, he could forget what he was, what Hojo had made him.

It was over. The last traces of the Lifestream had dissipated back into the planet, leaving the land whole and new, as if Shinra, the meteor and Sephiroth had never existed.

Sephirothâ€| Lucrecia's child was dead and Vincent was one of the group who had killed him. It had to be done. It was a necessity. Sephiroth could not be allowed to sacrifice so many lives for power. The only way Vincent believed he could atone for not being able to stop the experiment that produced Sephiroth was to help Cloud and his friends find and kill him.

Where was Lucrecia? Had she felt her child die? She had once told Vincent that she wanted to die, but the Jenova cells in her body wouldn't let her. The hold those cells had on life was too powerful for her to overcome. Perhaps now Jenova was dead, Lucrecia would also

be able to find peace.

"Lucreciaâ€|" he whispered. "I'm sorry, forgive me."

Cloud stood alone in Tifa's kitchen. The whole gang had split up. It felt strange after being together for so long and after all they had been through that they should now be separated.

Not all of them had left, but Cloud knew it was probably only a matter of time. Barrett was in Kalm with Marlene, and Cait Sith was taking care of the people of Midgar. Yuffie had taken her share of the materia back to Wutai, sulking, after finding that no one else was willing to give her their share as well. Vincent, as far as Cloud knew, was around here someplace and what he would do now was something of a mystery.

Cid and Red were still around for a few more days. Cid needed to fix up the Highwind before he flew back to Rocket Town and Red was catching a lift back to Cosmo Canyon. Shera was due to arrive any day with the spare parts Cid needed. After that, they would all be gone. Not that Cloud wanted them to leave, it was just that Tifa and him really needed to talk and somehow, with the others around, they never quite got the chance.

He walked back through to the living room and sat at a desk in the corner. He still had this letter to finish and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Letter writing wasn't really his style but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Cid leaned against the wall, not far from the wrought iron gates of the Mansion, entirely at peace with the world. Everything was perfect. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth, reflecting on that thought. At least, everything would be perfect when that dumb mechanic finally got here. I want to fly the damned Highwind! Why does Shera have to ruin everything? Remembering the episode in space when Shera had managed to save his life, Cid tried to be a little more charitable in his thoughts about her and failed miserably.

Red XIII appeared from nowhere, startling the wits out of Cid.

"Cidâ€|" Red began carefully, once the pilot had finished going through the list of every curse he knew. "Don't move too much and try to act casual. Look around at the top window of the Shinra Mansion. The second window along from the right."

Doing his best to follow Red's instructions, Cid twisted his head to the side and saw the silhouette of a woman framed against the light. "Who?" He asked.

Red shook his head and watched as the long-haired figure seemed to vanish from sight. Like a ghostâ€| He thought. I'm not superstitious but I've seen more than the elders back home have been able to explain. A ghostâ€|

Cid looked up at the old house, thoughtfully. "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Being as I'm not thinking about the Highwind, probably not. Red smiled to himself before answering Cid out loud. "Could it beâ€| her?"

He didn't know how long he sat there, trying to write, before Tifa walked in.

"Hey Cloud." She wandered over to the desk. "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing to Elmyra. Trying to tell her what happened." He paused and stood up. "She should know what Aeris did for us all."

"You don't need to do this." Tifa said softly. "You don't need to tell her. Barrett probably already did that."

"She deserves to hear it from me. I'm the one who was supposed to be protecting Aeris. Besides, I just don't trust Barrett to do it right."

Tifa laughed. "Nothing's changed there, then. But, seriously Cloud, you do _know_ why Aeris did what she did, don't you?"

A grave expression crossed his face as he thought again about what had occurred in the depths of the City of the Ancients. Again he saw the smile on her face, even as she fell to the floor. "She thought it was wrong for Sephiroth to sacrifice the planet and all the lives on it. She didn't want people to die."

"No. She didn't want _you_ to die. She did it for everyone, but especially for you."

Cloud hadn't thought of it that way before, and fell silent. Tifa suddenly pointed to the desk and laughed. "You really _haven't_ written anything yet, have you? It's just blank paper!"

"I lacked inspiration." Cloud said dryly. "Glad you find it funny."

"The only ink I see, is on your cheek, here." Tifa smiled, and standing on tiptoe she reached up and rubbed the ink smudge off his face.

"Tifaâ€|" Cloud began, slightly dizzy at her proximity, but he was quickly interrupted by a snigger. The pair spun around, like guilty schoolchildren, to see Cid and Red hovering just outside the doorway.

"We have some important news for you." Red informed them politely, entering the room fully as he spoke.

"If you ain't too busyâ€|" Cid sniggered again.

"Well?" Cloud asked, slightly put out that they had interrupted at that particular moment.

"We were passing by the Shinra Mansion. We saw a silhouette in one of the windows." Red paused, almost hoping that Cid would butt in and save him the awkwardness. "It was a young woman, and she almost seemed to disappear before our eyes. No one goes in that place except for Vincent. There was something about that figureâ€¦ Something didn't seemâ€¦ normal. There was somethingâ€¦"

"What are you trying to say, Red?" Cloud asked wearily.

"We think it might've been Aeris." Red finally got to the point and the colour drained from Cloud's face. A faint hope began to shine in his eyes.

"Let's go check it out." He decided immediately and walked out, followed closely by the pilot and Red.

Tifa hung back for a while. Aeris? Alive or a ghost? She remembered that hope in Cloud's eyes and wished with all her heart that it was Aeris in that place. If it wasn't, then Cloud was building up all that hope for nothing and he had been hurt enough already.

"Tifa? Are you coming with us?" Cloud stuck his head back around the doorframe and the light that filled his face nearly broke her heart.

"Yeah. I'll be out in a sec." She collected herself and shut her eyes for an instant. Whatever happensâ€¦ If he needs me, I'll be around, just like I've always been. If he doesn't, I'll just lurk in the shadows until he does._

Vincent sat alone on a ledge, high in the mountains that towered over the tiny village. He didn't feel much like returning there, yet. He hated the quaint little houses and the single, unpaved street. He hated the way the sun made the stones look golden early in the morning. He used to love the atmosphere of the place, but that was a long time ago. Now, he hated the small town with a passion. It reminded him of the pastâ€¦ of the time he'd been a Turk who fell in love with one of the leading scientists on the Jenova project. It didn't matter where he went in Nibelheim or what he did, he saw Lucrecia everywhere. He connected everything with a memory associated with her and there was nothing that could quell that.

She was there every time he looked around and it cut him deeply, but he welcomed it. He stayed in Nibelheim to remind himself of what he had done. He had let Lucrecia marry Hojo and he had done nothing to prevent the dreadful experiment that resulted in Sephiroth.

Inside, he didn't feel he deserved the peace that forgetting could bring.

Despite Lucrecia's intelligence, she had still been blissfully unaware of how Hojo's mind worked. She had no idea how ruthless he could be and Vincent had simply not thought to warn her. She had still been a naïve young girl, who had risen too quickly through the ranks of her fellow scientists to be one of the best.

Vincent relived his idiotic mistakes over and over. Whenever he

slept, all those moments ran constantly through his mind, a bittersweet taste of the past and a reminder of all that he had lost.

Now, more than ever, he dwelt on Lucrecia's fate. Where was she? There had been no sign of her at the waterfall cave she had made into her home. He had hoped to find her there, perhaps simply because they were the only two left from the Jenova project, they were the only Jenova infused beings left.

Vincent's forehead crinkled as he thought about that. It was entirely possible that Cloud also contained Jenova cells, but Vincent really wasn't sure _what_ had happened to Cloud anymore.

His thoughts returned to quickly to Lucrecia, just as they always did. He tried to suppress the gleeful voice inside that yelled his reason for wanting to find her. She was the only one whose opinion truly mattered to him, and, if she could somehow forgive all the dreadful mistakes he had made, perhaps he could find it in his soul to forgive himself.

He had wallowed in his misery and regret for many years now. He was drowning in it. But it was Lucrecia and only her that could throw him a lifeline. There was no one else.

Maybe she would want him to die, once she found out that he'd helped to kill her son. In his morbid frame of mind, that thought struck Vincent as a happy one. Whatever Lucrecia wanted from him, he would be more than happy to oblige.

Having renewed his resolve, Vincent stood, driven far more by his obsessive all-consuming love for the scientist than any of his nicely thought-out reasons. He would find Lucrecia.

Turning from the ledge to walk away, he felt the rocks crumble under his feet and a sick feeling of dread rose up in his stomach. With nothing to grab hold of but the air that rushed past him, Vincent closed his eyes peaceably and pictured a face. A face with childish features and brown hair pinned high away from her face. But her eyesâ€¦ Enormous brown eyes, so dark they were almost blackâ€¦ and then Vincent saw only the blackness.

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Cloud faced the mysterious figure with a sense of deep disappointment. He hadn't really expected it to be Aeris, but he had hoped.

Tifa dipped her head while her grief for Aeris fought with her own love for Cloud.

"Lucrecia?" Cloud asked eventually, remembering where he had seen her before.

Looking around her, the woman didn't seem to hear Cloud at all. In fact, she hadn't even noticed their presence yet. "I used to sit in this roomâ€¦" She mused to herself. "I sat in that chair and sang lullabies to my son. He was so smallâ€¦" She wandered around the room as if she were lost in a dream.

"Cid." Cloud turned to the pilot with a worried look on his face. "Get Vincent. He should be here."

"Well, yeah, I'll do thatâ€¦ Just as soon as you tell me where the %\$Â£ he is!" Cid retorted.

"Try the mountains." Tifa suggested. "He walks up there a lot."

"The mountainsâ€¦" Cid muttered to himself, disgusted, as he left. "It _would_ be the \$&*%(& mountains."

Looking back to Lucrecia, Cloud saw that she had stopped flitting around the room and was stood motionless, staring at him.

"Vincent?" She asked, having heard Cloud say the name. "Where's Vincent? He was with you when I saw you before."

"He'll be here soon." Tifa tried to soothe the woman, but her face changed quickly from slightly dazed to show an overwhelming anger.

"You left me! Vincent, I hate you! Don't let him near me!" She implored the confused Tifa. "He left me because he was jealous and spiteful. He left me with the monster that called himself Hojo, even though he _knew_ what Hojo was like. He _knew_ what Hojo would do! _I_ didn't have a clue," She continued bitterly. "But _he_ did and he left!"

"Sephirothâ€¦" She murmured, her face regaining some of its softness. "I can't regret you. No matter what they tell me about you. I didn't get to see him grow up, you know." She turned her face back to Tifa, tears in her eyes. "Hojo stole him from me as soon as it was practical to do so and returned with him to Midgar. I was left here, stranded."

Tifa looked up at Cloud, who shrugged helplessly. This wasn't their story, they didn't know what to do or say.

At that moment, Cid cursed his way back through the door, carrying what could only be Vincent. Dumping his burden carefully to the floor, Cid sighed. "Stupid \$^Â£&! Looks like he fell from one of the ledges up there."

Cloud looked down at the twisted, bruised form of his friend. He was not in a good way, but he was alive.

"Are you sure he fell?" Cloud asked Cid slowly. Tifa looked quickly at him in surprise and frowned at the question.

"He was at the bottom of a Â£\$%^& crevice! Of course heâ€¦" realisation of what Cloud was asking dawned. "Stupid son of a â€œ"

"He wouldn't do something like that, Cloud. I don't believe he would." Tifa told him firmly, flipping her hair back over her shoulder.

Lucrecia, who had started at the initial sight of Vincent, edged closer and peered cautiously at the ex-Turk. "Is he dead?" She asked, half-hopeful.

"No." Cloud replied, cross at her almost cheerful tone of voice.

"He should be!" She turned angrily and walked to the other side of the room, as far from the unconscious Vincent as possible.

"We have to get help for Vincent quickly." Tifa said quietly, reminding Cloud of his priorities. She looked up at him for guidance. "What can we do?"

"I don't know where to take him, Tifa. There isn't anyone medically qualified in Nibelheim and we can't get him to another town fast enough now that the Highwind is out of action. Apart from that, what doctor will treat him? Heâ€¦ he isn't even entirely humanâ€¦" His voice trailed off helplessly as he knelt at Vincent's side. "I don't know what to do."

As Cloud looked up, his eyes fell on Lucrecia. "You're a scientist. You must know enough to help Vincent!" He stepped quickly over to the woman as a scornful smile twisted her face.

"You think I'm mad? There is nothing you can do to make me help that traitor! He left me at Hojo's mercy, whether I knew it or not at the time. And because of him, my only child lies dead."

"How do you know he helped us kill Sephiroth? We never told you! How the $\hat{A}f\$\%^{\wedge}$ could you know that?" Cid burst out, unable to contain his curiosity.

"Everyone on the planet has been talking about it, that's how."

Cid opened his mouth to speak again, but closed it quickly when Cloud glared at him.

"I have absolutely no idea what went on between you two. I don't know what happened back then, but Vincent is my friend and I don't want him to die. Please help us." Cloud pleaded gently with the angry scientist. "I've seen one friend die, and one is already too many. Don't make me live through another death that I cannot prevent."

"He deserves to die! He left me alone!" Lucrecia was nearly in tears at the remembered pain of that desertion. Even if she had not wanted Vincent to love her, the sudden departure had cut her.

"But he didn't leave you." Tifa put in, remembering what Vincent had told them of his past. "Didn't you realise? He told us the story when we found him here. He found out about the experiment and fought with Hojo to try and stop it, but Hojo pulled Vincent's own gun on him. Hojo shot him, then experimented on him, leaving him locked up in the cellar of this house. That's why you didn't see him again. He didn't leave you, not of his own will."

Lucrecia stared blankly at Tifa, not comprehending what she had been

told for a long while. Slowly, very slowly, Tifa's words sunk in and began to make sense. They fitted perfectly to what had happened and Lucrecia began to tremble. She knew the account was true.

"What have I done?" She whispered, horrified, her dark brown eyes wide as she stared down at Vincent's unconscious form. "Oh no! Vincent, I never! What have I done?"

"You've done nothing that can't be fixed." Cloud sighed, impatiently. "Now help him! Please!"

Lost in the terror provoked by what she now perceived as her wrongful judgement of Vincent, Lucrecia didn't even hear Cloud.

"Vincent, Vincent, I'm sorry!" She fell to her knees besides him, hands clutching at him in despair. "I didn't know! You idiot! Trying to confront Hojo! You knew how utterly insane he'd become, why did you?" Lucrecia wept into her hands, realising the answer. Because of her. Because Vincent couldn't stand by and do nothing while Lucrecia and her child were turned into Hojo's latest lab project. It simply wasn't in him to stand helplessly and observe.

"Table." She looked up suddenly. "I need a table or a desk, some flat surface or other."

"Cid?" Cloud looked questioningly at the pilot who had stood silently observing with Red.

"Yeah, I know." Cid started to check the other doors of the large mansion, muttering to himself. "How come I have to do everything? Red just sits there, but me? Noooo. It's "Cid do this", "Cid do that" all the time. Here's one." He called back to the others.

"Is it OK for us to move him again?" Cloud asked.

Lucrecia nodded. "He's Jenova infused, like me. It takes a lot to kill us."

"We know that from first hand experience." Red muttered, thinking of Sephiroth, but the comment went unnoticed.

Having cleared the desk Cid had found and carried Vincent to it, Cloud and the rest of the group were about to leave Lucrecia to her work, but she called out. "Tifa, is it? Could you stay? I'll need a hand."

Tifa nodded and Red gave her the medical equipment he'd found in the basement. She watched as the woman fussed frantically over Vincent, trying to find what was wrong.

"Will he be OK? Do you know what's the matter with him?"

"I have an idea, but I don't know if I'm right, yet." Lucrecia pulled a small syringe out from the kit the Red had found and bent to take a blood sample.

"He's a bit pale. Should you do that?" Tifa asked, shifting nervously from foot to foot, feeling useless.

"He's always been pale." Lucrecia gave the girl a wan smile. "This won't do him any harm." She paused for a while, thinking to herself. "Hojo should've had a microscope in the basement somewhere."

"I'll ask if they can find it." Tifa peered out the door and asked Cid to look for a microscope in the basement. Cid didn't even bother to frame a reply, he simply glared. She turned to Cloud instead.

"I'll find it, Tifa. Don't worry."

When Cloud returned, Tifa took the small microscope in to Lucrecia who spent some time adjusting it.

She peered down at the blood sample she'd taken from Vincent and gasped in disbelief.

"What is it?" Tifa responded instantly, worried.

"Hojo didn't just inject Jenova cells into Vincent. There are things in here that I didn't know we had in the lab. I didn't even know they existed! I don't know what they are!" She left the microscope and walked back to Vincent, still lying on the desk they had commandeered. He looked like he was sleeping, just a little bruised, the cuts had been cleaned now and he didn't look such a mess. She ran a hand softly down the side of his face and shook her head. "What did he do to you?"

"You know what's wrong? Why he won't wake up?" Tifa pulled a chair out and sat, patiently waiting.

"Yes, I know." Lucrecia nodded gravely.

"Can you fix it?"

"Yes, but I don't know if I should." Seeing the confused look on Tifa's face, the woman started to explain. "Vincent doesn't have such a high proportion of Jenova cells in his body as I have, or as Sephiroth." Her voice stopped, her face filled with an inconsolable grief but she shook herself and continued.

"Vincent has enough Jenova within that it prevents him from dying from this, but not enough to heal him and pull him back. He's in limbo right now. I could help him quite easily by injecting more Jenova." She held up her own arm and looked at it with a curious expression on her features. "There's enough Jenova in me to pull Vincent back. A small blood transfusion would be adequate â€" he's lucky we're the same blood type â€" but I don't know if I should do that." She paused. "To inject more Jenovaâ€¦ he would probably never be able to end itâ€¦ He'd never have the freedom to make that choice for himself. He might even live until the end of the world, like meâ€¦ I don't know if I should take that bit of mortality away."

"It's selfish." She sighed. "I don't want him to die because then I'd be alone. I'd be the only one left from that time, the only one who knows what it's like to live under this sentence. I don't think I could stand that."

"If Vincent was awake now, and you gave him the choice, he would choose to stay with you. I know he would." Tifa said softly, earnestly, flipping her long hair back over her shoulder from where it had fallen forwards.

Lucrecia looked down at the pale face for a long while, the battle she was fighting inside showing plainly on her features. She nodded slowly. "I think you're right. But I'm going to need your help."

"It won't take long." Lucrecia said as she perched on the edge of the desk, next to Vincent. Her arm was held up a little, to keep the blood flowing down, and she clenched and unclenched her hand to help the flow. She watched the dark liquid that filled the slender tube as it ran from her arm to Vincent's, and she smiled a little at the warmth of it as it lay along her forearm. It felt strange, but comforting in a weird sort of way.

Tifa stared, amazed at the casual manner in which the scientist watched her own blood flowing out of her. She wasn't squeamish, butâ€ She shuddered a little, unable to suppress the reaction. She stood in silence, tired from helping Lucrecia.

"I love him, you know." Lucrecia said suddenly, breaking the silence, glancing fondly down at the sleeping figure, then looking back at Tifa again. "I did then, as well."

"Butâ€ not long ago you were saying that you hated him, andâ€ Ohhh, I'm confused!"

"So am I." The woman smiled. "But I'll try to explain it for you. I did love him, back then, but he always seemed to be so far removed from me. I don't remember when Hojo started his scheme, but he seemed to be so very much easier to talk to. He was always around and I saw him everyday day at the lab. The Jenova project seemed so magnificent then. It was all like one long dream. When Hojo started to tell me about the idea of infusing a childâ€ Oh, how could I have known he'd been carefully influencing me so that I'd volunteer? That was one of the reasons that finally stopped me from seeing Vincent. I wouldn't harm his child. How could I? And he wasn't a scientist, like we were; he wouldn't be able to understand it. It would hurt him."

"Not long after I married Hojo, Vincent disappeared." Her voice filled with undisguised anguish at the memory. "He left me. Stupid, naïve, foolish Lucrecia was left alone. I didn't know why he left, but all kinds of reasons passed through my mind. And although I had told him that I didn't love him, I did. I don't think I knew what I wanted. But I didn't want him to go." She paused. "I thought that I would die when he left. I wanted to die. But the Jenovaâ€ It was already too late for that. Hojo never left me alone long enough for me run away, and even if I could, where would I go? I was from Midgar. I didn't know my way around here at all."

Tifa said nothing, simply letting the woman continue with her story.

"Hojo started to show his true nature once Vincent was out of the

way. He despised me and he made sure I knew the only reason he tolerated my existence was the experiment. He hit me often, always careful to avoid my stomach." She smiled bitterly. "He was too clever to allow rage to jeopardise his precious project. I honestly thought that he was going to kill me after the baby was born. And, you know, I think he thought about it, but in the end he just took off for Midgar, taking Sephiroth with him." Lucrecia gave a dark laugh at that. "I wish he _had _ killed me. It would have been better than _this!_"

Tifa was silent for a while, unsure what to say to and worried about how dark the other woman's words were becoming, and then she looked up. "You don't have to think like that anymore. Vincent'll be with you when he wakes up. You don't need to worry about the past or anything that happened then anymore."

A strange expression crossed Lucrecia's face at that, but Tifa didn't notice, walking to the door to tell Cloud and the other's what was going on.

Lucrecia watched mutely as the girl left, only the sound of Vincent's breathing breaking the silence. She clamped the plastic tube that ran from her arm and pulled the needle out, wincing slightly, even though there was not the slightest pain. Taping a wad of tissue to her arm quickly, she fixed up Vincent's arm in a similar fashion.

He was a much better colour now, she reflected, absently running a hand down the side of his face.

She waited patiently, listening to the faint murmur of voices outside, and after a few minutes, Vincent's eyes drowsily opened. _Red!_ She realised immediately, startled at the colour. _His eyes weren't red beforeâ€¦_ They used to be blue. Gorgeous blue eyes, he had. You bastard, Hojo! I loved those eyes!_

Vincent, meanwhile, was concentrating on regaining the ability to see properly. Everything was blurred and indistinct through the mist swathed vision sleep leaves in its wake. There was a face leaning over himâ€¦_ An angel?_ Vincent wondered. _Did I die from that cliff fall?_ He blinked again. No, the face was human, not ethereal.

"I'm so glad you've woken up."

He recognised the familiar cadences immediately. _Lucreciaâ€¦_ He smiled blissfully to himself. _Angelâ€¦_ my first idea was right after all._ "I was going to look for youâ€¦"

He reached out, seeking her hand and wincing at the pain that shot up his arm. She let him close his hand around her own and Vincent was content to have that simple contact. He almost couldn't believe she was really here, besides him, but he had long ago learned to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Lucrecia was with him again, after such a long timeâ€¦ She had become as necessary to his well being as the air he breathed, but so many years had passed without her that it had had to be enough for him to know she was there, somewhere.

In the waterfall cave, it had been the hardest thing in the world for Vincent to walk out and leave her, but she was safer there, he reasoned at the time. Sephiroth had to be dealt with and Lucrecia would be safe in the cave, he would find her again after it was

over.

There had been hostility and anger in her voice then. Still, she wasn't hostile now, so Vincent dismissed it.

Lucrecia explained what had happened to him in a quiet tone, all the while thinking over some of the things that Tifa had told her. _He's been unshakably loyal to me since before Hojo locked him upâ€¦ what did I do to deserve that? What did I do to deserve years of dedicated devotion? He thinks always of me, only me, never even does he worry about himself, just me. And what did I do? Refused to help him when he was injured, screaming my hatred while he was lying unconscious on the floor. I _don't_ deserve him. I never did. _

"You have even more Jenova cells in your body now. It's what I had to do to help you get better." She said simply, her mind still tracing out dark thoughts of its own.

"Jenova? Where from?" Vincent's forehead crinkled slightly under the dark hair.

She held up her arm and tapped it, with a faint smile. "Me. Blood transfusion." She explained.

He nodded. Lucrecia's blood running through his veinsâ€¦ the notion made him smile in pure whimsy. He quite liked the poetry of the idea.

"The increased percentage of Jenova means thatâ€¦ that you're even less human than you were. I think you would have to contrive to end it, it couldn't happen by accident now. You're like me."

"Like youâ€¦" He echoed thoughtfully. "I'll be with you always now, won't I?"

Lucrecia was silent at that and the blissful expression on Vincent's face was suddenly replaced by abject guilt as he misinterpreted her reaction.

"Lucrecia, forgive me!" He burst out, clutching tightly at her hand in desperation. "Forgive me for everything I've done to you and for what I did to your son!" His voice faltered. "Forgiveâ€¦ forgive me for what I amâ€¦"

"There is nothing there to forgive anymore, Vincent. I can't hold anything against you. But if you need me to grant you your absolution, then I will. I will grant you any absolution you feel you need, but it is unnecessary." She told him softly.

She watched him for a long while, staring into the deep crimson eyes, before she spoke again. "I love you." Such a simple comment. No grand declaration, just an unadorned statement of how things were, so typical of the scientist that Lucrecia was.

She leaned over him hesitantly, his hand releasing hers and moving a short way up her arm, then she bent to kiss his lips.

Eventually drawing back, Lucrecia gave a faint sigh before noticing how drowsy Vincent's eyes were becoming. "You need sleep." She advised.

"There's nothing now thatâ€¦ that can possiblyâ€¦ part us, is there?" Vincent slurred, half-asleep already. Lucrecia gave no answer, watching sadly as his eyelids closed, peaceably. "Love you." He muttered, falling into slumber, a heartbreakingly happy expression on his face for the first time in decades.

"No Vincent." She said quietly, once she was sure he was asleep. "Nothing can part us now. Except me. Everything that has happened to you is my fault. You're not the one that needs to atone for your past mistakes, it's _me_. It was never you who was at fault. Everything will be fixed when you wake up. I don't deserve to be on the pedestal you've placed me on. I'm not infallible. I've made so many mistakes. I don't deserve to be in your life and I'll make sure that I'm not."

Lucrecia's brimming eyes fell on Vincent's gun where it lay on a shelf. Tifa had put it there for safekeeping, but now it had a purpose. With a last look at Vincent, she picked up the gun and hurried from the room.

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By Arian

Tifa turned from her quiet conversation with Cloud as the door opened and Lucrecia crept out furtively. "Where are you going?" She asked curiously, wondering what could possibly compel the woman to leave Vincent.

"What? Oh, I just need toâ€¦ to, ah, to go somewhere else for a while. That room gets stuffy when you sit in there too long." Lucrecia stuttered, looking guilty and trying to conceal something from their view.

"Shouldn't someone stay in there with Vincent? Is he OK yet?"

"He woke up not long ago. He's sleeping again now, but he's fine. Could you keep an eye on him? Just look after him for me, would you?" Lucrecia looked imploringly at Tifa, starting to edge towards the door, even as Tifa nodded her agreement.

"She was behavingâ€¦ a bit odd." Cloud commented once the woman had left.

Tifa nodded thoughtfully. "What do you think? I know she's been acting a little strange before now, but this was different."

"I'll find Cid and Red. I don't know what's going on but if we stick together then hopefully we can sort out whatever it is. What about Vincent?"

"I'll look after him." Tifa smiled as he waved amiably from the doorway, then returned to the room they had left Vincent in.

Lucrecia stood on the path that led up to the mountains, deciding that this was far enough. There was no need for her to go any further away from the village, no one would bother her here.

She pulled out the gun she had taken and her hands trembled as she lifted it. _Seems simple enough to operate._ She told herself. _I'm sure I can figure it out._ She nearly laughed. One of the leading scientists of the pioneering Jenova project should have no trouble working out something like this. If the Turks could do it, then there was no reason why she couldn't.

She tried to steady her hands and her resolve. It would take more than one shot. Many more. It took a lot to take out a Jenova infused being. She would just have to keep trying. She had planned the whole thing out on the way up here, meticulously plotting every detail. She'd have to aim for her stomach and chest, that would be the best way. The last thing she wanted was to shoot herself in the head and find herself still alive and unable to lift the gun, let alone able to aim.

Lucrecia started to laugh, quietly. Not insane laughter, just amused. She never thought she'd have to plan the details and manner of her passing.

She looked around at the mountains one final time. _I couldn't have picked a more beautiful spot. Here, yes, here is the right place. This is somewhere to be at peace. _

Shutting her eyes for a moment, she ordered her thoughts. _For Vincent. So that I won't hurt him anymore. And because this is how I feel it should be. He deserves better. _

_ C'mon Lucrecia! Stop staring at the damned thing and pull the trigger!_ She frowned to herself, trying to compel her finger to move through the power of sight alone. It refused to budge. _Go on! Just pull that tiny little lever! I'll count how many shots it takes, to help ignore the pain. _She coaxed and pleaded with herself silently, before eventually bursting into tears. She couldn't do it herself. She just didn't have the willpower to cause such injury to herself, not even to help Vincent.

She sniffed and wiped the crystalline droplets from her face and persuaded herself to think rationally through this, to start thinking like the scientist she was. _If I could just find someone else who was willing. _ It didn't take long for her quick mind to come up with a solution.

Sleeping without the condemning memories for the first time since Hojo had carried out his vicious experiment, Vincent's soul soared free. Free from the painful memories and free from guilt! Oh, but just to be like this again, after so long! To be so blissfully happy it was painful. He never thought he'd feel like that again. Never. But now, there was no guilt. Lucrecia had said she forgave him! And if she, the one he had caused the most pain to, the only one whose opinion truly mattered to him, could do that then he could at last

forgive himself. No need to atone for the things he had failed to prevent. That was over now. But still there was regret and sorrow, things that echo down from the past, inevitable and unalterable.

Vincent put them from his mind quickly, not wanting to get bogged down in gloom again yet. He didn't want anything to hinder this joyous feeling.

Slowly, he was dragged back down to earth, back down to his quickly recovering, but still somewhat bruised body. He knew he had not slept long and he slowly blinked his eyes open, trying to accustom them to the light again. His sight was still misty as his gaze fell on the brown haired figure that stood above him.

Smiling faintly, Vincent raised himself up a little, ignoring the aches and twinges that ran down his spine. He was still feeling intoxicated. Lucrecia had said that she loved him, and that she forgave him! Seeing only a mist of brown hair around the face in front of him, he leaned forwards and kissed her, with a nagging feeling that she had been about to say something. In an instant, he darted back. This wasn't Lucrecia.

His vision cleared as he blinked again in shock and he saw Tifa looking at him with an expression that could only be described as stunned. She blinked back at him and there was silence for a moment. Then she laughed.

"You must be feeling a lot better then, Vincent."

Vincent had a mortified look on his face, which hadn't been helped by her laugh. Eventually finding his voice, he tried to force out some sort of apology. "Tifa! I didn't realiseâ€¦ I thought you wereâ€¦ I didn't meanâ€¦ I'm sorry!" He gave up on trying to explain and simply settled for flushing an attractive shade of pale pink.

Tifa giggled quietly to herself again. She actually thought the whole situation was quite funny.

Vincent, on the other hand, was wondering just how he had mistaken Tifa for Lucrecia. It wasn't as if they looked that much alike. "Where is Lucrecia?" He asked suddenly.

Tifa managed to control her mirth and her face took on a more serious air. "I don't know. She went out a little while ago and I haven't seen her since." She refrained from telling Vincent that Lucrecia had been acting slightly peculiarly, reasoning that there was no need to worry him until they knew what was going on. "Cloud went to find Cid and Red earlier. The pair didn't like hanging around here. I think the waiting made them edgy. When the three of them get back â€"

"

She was interrupted by the faint, sharp sound of a single gunshot from somewhere in the village. "What was that?"

Vincent recognised the sound only too well. "Tifaâ€¦" He spoke slowly as he patted his side with one hand. "Where's my gun?"

"It's on the shelf, I put it there to â€" Oh!" She stopped suddenly in mid-sentence as she saw the empty shelf.

A feeling of sick dread rose up in Vincent's stomach, similar to the feeling when he had known he was going to fall off the cliff-ledge. But this was worse. That fall had just been him. This was Lucrecia. He knew her well enough to take a rough guess at what was going on outside. He cursed softly to himself as he slid off the desk and Tifa helped him to stand.

"Hey. Hey! Hey, Vincent!" Tifa yelled at him, trying to get his attention as he crossed quickly to the door.

He glanced back at her, briefly. "What?"

"Be careful. I'm sure you still aren't well enough to go charging round the village. And we don't _know_ that was Lucrecia."

"I do." He muttered, anxious to be gone.

"I'm sure she wouldn't want you to end up hurting yourself." Tifa said pointedly.

Vincent scowled back at her. "She doesn't know _what_ she wants. She never has. That's always been the problem."

Tifa sighed, resigned to the fact that if there was the slightest chance that Lucrecia was hurt, Vincent would happily kill himself in the process of finding out. "Fine then. I'm coming with you." She moved to the door and put an arm around his waist, offering him her support. He still wasn't as strong as he thought he was and he leaned heavily on her as they quickly left the mansion.

Lucrecia marched resolutely into the general store, not far from the mansion. As luck would have it, the owner was the same guy who had been here all those years ago, when she had still been human. The little store was quiet and the man, somewhere in his forties possibly, looked intensely bored.

She slammed the gun down on the counter and the man looked at it carefully for a moment.

"That's worth about â€" "

"I don't want to sell it!" Lucrecia sighed impatiently. "Do you remember me?"

"What?" The man, Aaron by name, scrutinised her carefully for a moment. "Yeah. You were one of them Shinra employees who pottered around in that big house years ago." Abruptly, he realised what was wrong. "But you can't be. If you were her you'd beâ€| old."

"I _am_ her. And this is what I want you to do." She quickly outlined her plan and Aaron began to look faintly sick.

"Ladyâ€| you're a complete wacko. And I don't want anything to do with you!"

Lucrecia forced the gun into his hand. "Did you lose anyone dear to

you in that fire a while back?"

"As it happens, yeah. My young son, and a few of my friends died." He stopped short. It was still a sore point, even now. Many in the town had never really gotten over the damage the fire had caused, not the physical damage, but the psychological scars that it had left.

"Did you want to lash out at somebody? Did you want to find somebody to blame and make them pay?"

Aaron stared at her. "â€|What are you saying?"

"It's my fault. The fire was my fault. It couldn't have started without me." Her voice got louder as she spoke and she strung the words together quickly. She watched through calculating eyes as Aaron got increasingly angry with each sentence she spoke. "I'm ageless, a willing part of the experiment that created Sephiroth. I created Sephiroth, and doomed your village to its burning! It's even down to me that the threat of the meteor was ever brought about!"

"You?!_" Even through his anger, Aaron could think clearly. "No! You didn't do that. Everyone knows that it was the SOLDIER general. It was Sephiroth_ who summoned meteor!"

"Sephiroth was my son_!!!" Lucrecia screamed at him and Aaron finally lost it. He watched the town burn again and he saw the shape of his young son through the flames, as a long blade cut him down. He looked up into the unearthly green eyes of the killer and was unable to contain the need for revenge as he saw the slight smirk.

He saw only Sephiroth as he fired the gun.

In spite of herself, Lucrecia cried out. The bullet had hit her forearm, Aaron was aiming at something in his memory, not at her.

"Fire again!" She yelled at him. "It's all because of me! It's my fault!_" She regretted her treatment of the man. He probably didn't deserve what she was putting him through, but he was a means to an end. She needed to keep him angry at her, to keep him firing that gun.

The pain ran up her arm in agonising jolts as she clutched it to her, the instinct for self-preservation still strong.

Aaron lowered the gun a little, the sight of the deep crimson blood on Lucrecia's sleeve bringing him back to reality.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Lucrecia turned instantly at the sound of Vincent's voice and saw him in the doorway, Tifa stood not far behind him.

He walked fully into the room and held out his hand to Aaron. Aaron dropped the gun into Vincent's open hand unquestioningly, and grateful. He had only just realised that he had shot at Lucrecia and now he was beginning to tremble. Tifa helped him to his chair behind the counter, trying to calm him down.

Vincent turned angrily back to Lucrecia. "Why are you doing this? You

want to die? Fine! But why do this to me first?" He spread his hands out in disgust. "You cure me. You heal me, making me as immortal as yourself in the process, then you run off and find somebody to shoot you! Lucrecia, why give me back my life if that's what you intended?"

Neither of them turned as Cloud, Cid and Red appeared, hovering just inside the door.

"That's the most I've ever heard him say at once. Maybe that cliff fall did him more damage than we thought." Cid hissed to Red, catching Cloud's serious look and falling silent.

"It's my fault! Everything that has happened to you, and everything that happened to this town, is all down to me! If I liveâ€¦ you'd never let me goâ€¦ but you deserve better, soâ€¦" Lucrecia forced the words out, trying to make Vincent see her reasoning, trying to make him understand.

"Lucrecia, we all make mistakes. All of us, all the time, make mistakes. Terrible, terrible things happen that we cannot undo, that we cannot prevent. And I know this better than anyone. How long was I consumed with my guilt at what happened back then? But you forgave me. For everything, for what I was and what I am, for things that perhaps could never have been stopped by any of us. But you can't give up because of that or you'll never have a chance to put things right again." He spoke softly, gently persuading. "If you die, you leave me here with nothing. Isn't all I've suffered for you enough already? We have a chance to make things better now. To make things the way they never were, and the way they _should_ be. Don't leave me here alone. I couldn't bear it."

"Too many mistakesâ€¦ I can't fix them. There'sâ€¦ not enough tears in the world to â€¦ to fix what I did to you." Lucrecia cried softly, wondering at how it could be that she had any tears left after all the crying she had been doing.

"She's as bad as Vincent! They're both ^&\$Â£% suited to each other!" Cid glared right back at Cloud as the leader strived to silence him.

"You weren't to blame. Hojoâ€¦" Vincent grew silent, remembering the one thing that had made a difference to him in his depression. "I forgive you for whatever you think you are to blame for, Lucrecia."

She looked up into the crimson eyes. _He forgives me! How amazing those simple words can have this effect on me!_ Her soul suddenly soared at the prospect of a new beginning and she was swamped by the same blissful euphoria that Vincent had experienced earlier. _He has forgiven me. I am whole again._

Vincent glanced over to where Tifa was still trying to comfort the distraught Aaron. A murderous gleam flickered in his eyes as he remembered the deep red stain on Lucrecia's sleeve. Tifa caught his look and shook her head firmly.

"It wasn't deliberate, Vincent."

At that, the ex-Turk nodded slowly. He reached out pulled Lucrecia

gently towards him, being careful not to crush her wounded arm.

"Is there really this chance? That things could work at last?" She asked in wonder.

"A new start, for all of us." He paused thoughtfully. "The planet has been renewed, reborn from the mess Shinra made of it. It's a time for new beginnings and second chances. This time perhaps things will work out. Things could be the way they never did before, the way they should have been." He looked over to where Cloud still stood by the doorway and their eyes met for a moment. Perhaps, for the first time, Vincent realised what Aeris had bought for them. Not just their lives, but a future worth living. "Aeris and Holy have given us all another chance at life, to put things right and correct our mistakes. We own it to her not to waste the gift she has given us."

Cloud bowed his head. No one could help him with his grief, not even Tifa. It was his and his alone to deal with and to live through.

Vincent walked slowly to the door with Lucrecia, each leaning on the other for support as they made their way down the path to the Shinra Mansion on the outskirts of Nibelheim.

Before she stepped inside the tall iron-wrought gate and pulled it closed behind her, Lucrecia looked around at the small village and up at the vast mountains that towered over it.

"Thank you, Aeris." She breathed quietly to the girl she had never met who had sacrificed everything to give not only this wonderful second chance with Vincent, but to give everyone a second chance at life.

And perhaps, somewhere in the depths of the Lifestream, Aeris heard her.

Author's note: Depressingâ€¦ yes. But this is Vincent! What did you expect? Sweetness and light? Actually, that'd probably be quite funny!

Just a little something that sounds like Vincent. It's from Anne Rice's "Interview With The Vampire". Is it me or does Vince sound a lot like Louis?

"And yet nothing turned me from our quest and nothing could turn me, but over and over, committed as I was, I pondered the great risk of our questions, the risk of any question that is truthfully asked; for the answer must carry an incalculable price, a tragic danger."

End
file.